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Acts 10:24–48, English Standard Version, abridged.

Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.” ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered.

³⁰ And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. The gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

The first gentile Christian.

The Book of Acts is widely believed to have been written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Luke was a companion of Paul and was present for some of the history presented in Acts. The book begins with the resurrected Jesus appearing to the Apostles and then ascending into the sky. Then the Apostles gather in Jerusalem. Peter then becomes the focus of the effort to spread the faith. Mostly, he preaches to Jews. It will be Paul who will become famous as the

evangelist to the gentiles, but Peter does preach to gentiles, to non-Jews. In fact, the very first person who is identified in the Bible as a non-Jew who converts to the faith and becomes a follower of Christ, is evangelized by Peter, not Paul. This happens in the southern part of Israel, near Jerusalem. So, let's look at the first gentile to accept Christ.

Cornelius is a centurion in the Roman army. It's most likely true that no actual Roman legions were stationed in Judea at this time, and so he is probably one of many local recruits. Cornelius is part of a force whose job it is to maintain order in this Roman province. At the beginning of this story, Cornelius is not yet a follower of Jesus. Luke tells us that already, Cornelius and all members of his household fear God. Remember that in the Bible, to fear God means to follow and respect God. Cornelius is known to give alms to poor Jewish people. He prays all the time. Thus, we see that although he is a gentile, he believes in the Jewish God. It's not clear at what level he believes. He certainly has not become a Jew. Most likely, he has lived with Jews all his life and has grown comfortable with their notion of God and has an intuitive feeling that he wants to be one of the faithful. But the only option for him as a gentile is to become a Christian.

It was a big deal for Peter to bring the faith to a gentile. Up to this point, Jesus had simply been the Jewish Messiah who was rejected by the leaders of his

faith. Jesus – until this moment – was a Jewish phenomenon. In truth, we certainly do not know for a fact that Cornelius was the first gentile Christian – he is just the first one to be documented in the Bible. There is a beautiful, poetic story that precedes this conversion. Remember that up until now, Peter has seen himself as the evangelist to Jews. It wasn't yet in his heart to try to bring Christ to gentiles. Before he meets Cornelius, Peter is on a rooftop where he is presented with a variety of foods that Jews would consider unclean. Peter's reaction, as a devout Jew, is to reject this food. But a voice tells him that he should eat the food. Peter tries to refuse, saying he has always followed the Jewish food laws. But then the voice – which is obviously God – says: *"What God has made clean, do not call common."* This is from the ESV. The New International Version translates it more clearly for modern readers: *"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."* Peter is still processing this statement from God when there is a knock on his door and messengers from Cornelius tell him that Cornelius wants a visit from Peter.

Two days later, Peter meets Cornelius, along with friends and relatives of his. This is what Luke tells us happens: *Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.* ²⁵ *When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.* ²⁶ *But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man."* ²⁷ *And as he talked with him, he went in and found*

many persons gathered. It's then that we are told how Cornelius decided to ask Peter to visit. Luke writes this: ³⁰*And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing* ³¹*and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.* ³²*Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.'* ³³*So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."* We see that it is an angel who appears before Cornelius, telling him that he should send for Peter. Peter, on the rooftop in Joppa, has come to understand that he shouldn't consider anyone as "*impure or unclean*". Luke then tells us this: *Then Peter declared,* ⁴⁷*"Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"* ⁴⁸*And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.* Cornelius and his family embrace the faith, they receive the Holy Spirit, and are baptized with water. This becomes a critical milestone in the spread of faith: it has now jumped the boundary from Judaism to the gentiles – that is, to us.

What happens next is that Peter tells the other Apostles, as well as other believers, what has happened. Here is what Luke writes: ¹⁸*When they heard these*

things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." The emerging church has been taken in a new direction. The Gospel will be brought to all people, not just Jews. It appears that God sent an angel to a centurion who had been captivated by the stories of the Jews around him and who had come to believe in their God. That angel had this man send for Peter, so that he could be baptized, and along with his entire extended family, be brought into the faith. We see another beautiful allegory in the Bible. Most people reading this wouldn't see it. That centurion is *us*. We had the Holy Spirit within us, working on us, letting the light in. Then God intervened and brought us to faith. All of us are like the first gentile Christian. We are all the Centurion Cornelius.

Now, though, I must admit that it is very presumptuous of me to assume that everyone hearing this is a gentile. It's not even clear what it means. In the Bible, it simply refers to someone who is not a Jew. But a Jew could decide to follow Jesus and still be a Jew; becoming a Christian did not make them a gentile. Mormon people in their pride of being followers of the Israelite tradition sometimes refer to non-Mormons as gentiles. The word gentile derives from the Hebrew and Yiddish word *goy*. *Goy* is considered pejorative today, and I don't think that many Jews would refer to any non-Jews as *goyem*. I've been told that to really be a *goy*, you

must be male. The bottom line with the term gentile is that in the Bible it is a racial term that also corresponds to a religious group. It refers to people who are not ethnic Jews, and back then, these people were all pagans. Let's try to find a definition of gentile that is useful for us. Maybe this is as close as we can come to a definition that's relevant today: a gentile will be a non-Jew who does not truly follow the God of the Israelites and needs to be fully introduced to God. Believing Christians then, will not be gentiles.

There is a subtlety to the story of Cornelius the centurion. Notice that before he embraces the teachings of Jesus, he already believes, at least to some extent, in the God of the Jews. But to take that last step, to be a fully committed believer, he must deepen his faith by committing himself to Christ. An angel appears to him to tell him what to do, to call for Peter to visit him and to be baptized. It was true that *"to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life,"* but he must give absolutely everything to God. He can't hold anything back. He believes in God, but he is still a gentile. Is there an angel talking to you, telling you that you are still part gentile, that you are holding back just a bit?

A while back, there was a man in the hospital whom I was asked to go see. (I am changing details of this story, as I always do, to protect his privacy.) This man didn't ask for a chaplain. He asked a nurse for a "pastor", and she sent that request

to the chaplains' office. We don't have anyone called a pastor at the hospital. The other chaplains, none of whom are clergy, asked me to go see him. He wasn't dying. His illness wasn't anything dramatic at all. He had not had a brush with death. He had been injured in a car accident and had been knocked unconscious; he was there for a couple of days because he had a bruise on his brain. He said that he'd been sitting in bed for forty-eight hours with nothing to do but watch TV. The TV gave him a headache though, and so he had kept it off. So, there he was, a guy that was usually go-go-go all the time, keeping busy, squeezing in church on Sunday morning, and suddenly he had two days with nothing to do. It had caused him to think about his faith. He said that he hadn't been baptized as a kid, but he had never questioned his faith. He hadn't started to go to church until he was in his early twenties and met the woman to whom he was now married. Now, though, he realized that he had compartmentalized his faith too much. He was only a Sunday morning Christian, he realized. It wasn't like he did unchristian things the other six days. He had a wife and two young kids. He was devoted to his family. He never drank until he was drunk, tried to be kind to everyone, and thought that it was horrific the way online gambling is being pushed so aggressively on TV. But he didn't think about God during the week. He prayed with his kids at night, read the Bible to them. He wanted to be a full time Christian, he said, and he just wasn't

there yet. I said that it was great that he had come to that level of awareness. We talked about praying during the week and keeping God in his mind. Then he asked me to baptize him. I asked him if he might rather be baptized in his own church. He said no, his church had an interim pastor, and he didn't even know the man. So, later that afternoon, when his wife was visiting, I went back to his room, and I baptized him. His wife became very emotional. It was very touching.

The first reference to baptism in the Bible is John the Baptist using the running water of the river Jordan to baptize Jews. He isn't making them Christians: the faith does not yet exist. His baptisms are an extension of the traditional practice of repentance performed by Jews at the time. These are ritual baths for purification. People symbolically cleanse their souls by cleansing their bodies. The first true baptism was that of Jesus. Remember though, that just before John baptizes Jesus, he is quoted in Matthew as saying this: ¹¹ *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* That's the difference. When we fully accept God, when we fully commit to being followers of Jesus, we are not undergoing a ritualistic bath where we seek the cleansing of our souls. The big difference is that we accept the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, and we commit to letting the Holy Spirit drive our actions throughout our lives.

That's what I told this young father – that he needed to take the next step and embrace the Holy Spirit. The word baptism derives from a Greek word “*baptizo*”, which means “to immerse”. But as Christians we are also baptized in the fire of the Holy Spirit. This is how we go from being Sunday morning Christians to being 24/7 Christians – by living with that fire within us every second of every day. When Cornelius the centurion is baptized, he makes that next step. He isn't just baptized in water. He doesn't just cleanse his soul and accept God. He has already done those things. He accepts both Christ and the Holy Spirit. He truly becomes a very different human being. This is how we learn to fully live with grace for all people, with forgiveness, and with a desire for all people to live in total peace. Please pray with me.

God, let us live every second of every day as fulltime believers. Let us be baptized with water and with the fire of the Holy Spirit. Let us feel that fire every day, all day. Amen.